

MOUNTAINS

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

More walk, less talk – a New Year’s resolution

Janet McCue and Paul Bonesteel

Word from the Smokies

“Launched out on an adventure today,” the diary entry read. Masaharu Iizuka, a handsome young man with a wide grin, wrote the passage in Japanese characters on what we think might have been his birthday, Jan. 18, 1915.

To launch his adventure, he boarded a train in San Francisco and headed east, eventually making his way to Asheville, where he accepted a position in the laundry room of the elegant Grove Park Inn.

But serving as a valet to the rich and famous was not what had drawn this Japanese man to the United States. Like other young immigrants, Masaharu Iizuka had lofty aspirations and ambitions. Like them, he imagined a “great future, the castle of success.” He wrestled with moving on, tried relocating to Colorado, thought about becoming a barber or a miner, signed on with another boss ... but WNC kept tugging him back.

Four years after his stint in the laundry room, the entrepreneur began transforming his dreams into reality. He opened his own photography studio, documenting the booming town, its prominent visitors, and the mountain landscapes surrounding the Asheville area. To make it easier for customers, he westernized his name to George Masa. The Vanderbilts hired him to photograph their Biltmore gardens while industrialists and architects engaged him to highlight Asheville’s striking new buildings and progressive civic improvements. Masa became the official photographer of the Asheville Chamber of Commerce. He expanded into motion pictures, working with the leading film companies, including Paramount, Pathé and Warner Brothers.

When he wasn’t shooting cityscapes, Masa was in the mountains. He photographed a landscape that few had seen, even fewer had explored. Masa was the kind of photographer that the historian and curator John Szarkowski described as “the photographer-as-explorer ... a new kind of picture-maker: part scientist, part reporter, and part artist.”

Challenged by the mountainous terrain and fickle weather of the Smokies, Masa overcame these barriers to capture the power and beauty of the mountains. His contributions helped convince a nation that the Great Smoky Mountains, the last of the Eastern wilderness, was worth protecting as a national park.



George Masa poses in field with three view cameras on tripods circa 1920-30. PROVIDED BY THE HORACE KEPHART FAMILY COLLECTION, GSMA



Dressed in his typical attire, George Masa sets up for a shot at Shining Rock in 1931. PROVIDED BY THE HORACE KEPHART FAMILY COLLECTION, GSMA

Masa was an unofficial publicity arm of the park, sending photo scrapbooks of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park to both the governors of North Carolina and Tennessee and the First Lady, Mrs. Calvin Coolidge.

Masa plodded ahead well above the tree line pushing a wheel odometer along a remote trail that would soon become the Appalachian Trail. He was weighed down by his ever-present camera but little else save for a can of caviar and some bread. He measured, mapped, and prepared trail data for the southern portion of the AT.

Masa was an unofficial publicity arm of the park, sending photo scrapbooks of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park to both the governors of North Carolina and Tennessee and the First Lady, Mrs. Calvin Coolidge. Masa’s friend and fellow advocate for the establishment of the park, Horace Kephart, was astonished at all the “exploring and photographing and mapping” Masa had done “without compensation but at much expense to himself, out of sheer loyalty to the Park idea and a fine sense of scenic values.”

Masa also believed in the restorative power of nature. As he confided to a friend, “When I make trip these things

don’t bother me. I just leave office and go into woods, get fresh balsam air then come back start strong fight, no use to worry, that’s way I do.”

Masa’s story is a narrative of perseverance and dedication. The early 20th century was rife with anti-immigrant furor and restrictive legislation. Masa was hospitalized with the flu during the 1918 pandemic, someone stole his car and wrecked it, his business languished in the economic depression of the 1930s. He died in 1933 in the County Home — pulmonary tuberculosis listed as the cause of death.

The Carolina Mountain Club buried George Masa in Asheville’s Riverside Cemetery, paying for the plot, the headstone, and eventually lobbying successfully for a mountain peak named in his honor, Masa Knob. One of his fellow hikers wrote: “A lot of people do things for money, they expect something out of it, tangible. I don’t think George ever expected anything except satisfaction. ... I think he was just a dedicated person ... like Johnny Appleseed.”

Masa’s tombstone lists his birthdate as January 20, 1881; census records and draft registration data suggest alternate dates. With encouragement from Great Smoky Mountains Association and support from the Podell Endowment Award for Research and Scholarship, we hope to discover some of the basic details of

Masa’s early life, including his birthdate, his educational background, and the date of his arrival in the states for a forthcoming biography of the photographer.

There are many gaps in the early history of Masaharu Iizuka, yet much of his legacy is available to us today. Brent Martin travels in Masa’s “photographic footprints” in his forthcoming book, “George Masa’s Wild Vision: A Japanese Immigrant Imagines Western North Carolina,” which will be published by Hub City Press later this year.

You, too, can walk in Masa’s footprints. For inspiration, take a tour of the many Masa photos available online through the Buncombe County Special Collections.

Masa’s mantra, “More walk, less talk” is a perfect New Year’s resolution. So pull on your boots, grab a hiking stick, maybe even a can of caviar, and go explore the Smokies, hike in Chimney Rock State Park or pick up a section of the Appalachian Trail. Launch out on your own adventure today.

Filmmaker Paul Bonesteel and writer Janet McCue are at work on a full-length biography of George Masa to be published by Great Smoky Mountains Association in 2023. GSMA is an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at SmokiesInformation.org.

Snowstorm

Continued from Page 1A

Buncombe County spokesperson Kassi Day said county emergency services is also monitoring the weather, and will work with county management to push out any necessary messages.

She encouraged people to take action now for any items they may need, such as groceries, pet food, propane or heating oil and alternate sources of heat.

“We encourage everyone to watch their local weather stations, and NWS alerts, keep your phone batteries charged, and have extra blankets and an emergency kit ready,” Day said.

She directed residents to the county’s preparedness page for tips, tricks and helpful numbers.

People can sign up for Buncombe County alerts at buncombecounty.org/codered or text [bcalert](tel:828-253-4723) to 99411. They can sign up for Asheville Alerts at ashevillenc.gov/

[service/sign-up-for-avl-alert/](#).

Both city and county encouraged residents to limit travel and stay off of the road during snow events if possible.

County and city closings

Asheville City government offices and Buncombe County offices will be closed Jan. 17 in observance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

ART bus service routes and facilities will operate on a holiday schedule, which is the same as the Sunday schedule.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day is one of six days ART runs on a reduced holiday schedule. For more route information or service alerts, visit RidetheART.com.

Asheville City Schools are closed Jan. 14 due to COVID-19-related staffing shortages. Schools are also closed Jan. 18.

Red Cross recommendations

After Asheville’s Jan. 3 storm caused

power outages across the county, the Red Cross opened a shelter to assist families impacted.

Maya Franklin, regional director of communications for Red Cross, said the organization does not currently have plans to open shelters, but stands ready to support community members as needed in coordination with its emergency partners.

If the need is determined, the location of the shelter will depend on where the community is most impacted, she said.

In the meantime, the Red Cross recommends the following:

- Monitor alerts. Check local weather reports and any notifications by phone, television or radio.
- Don’t use a gas stove to heat your home and do not use outdoor stoves indoors for heating or cooking.
- Unplug appliances and electronics to avoid power overloads or damage from power surges. Use flashlights, not candles.

Code Purple shelter options

Asheville’s Code Purple is extended through Jan. 16. Options are:

ABCCM Costello House for men, 141 Hillside St., 4 p.m. and throughout the night in addition to law enforcement and paramedic escorts after hours.

Salvation Army for women and children only, 6-7 p.m. Law enforcement or paramedic escort allowed after hours, 828-253-4723.

Trinity United Methodist Church, 587 Haywood Road is available for overnight for families, couples and other vulnerable people who are unable to access other options.

Entry for overnights is 4-7 p.m. Law enforcement or paramedics after hours, 828-253-5471.

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